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THE HARVARD COURSE

IN

PHOTOPLAY WRITING



UNIT II.

Plot Construction.

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BUILDING THE PLAY.

The theoretical construction of a photoplay has been set forth in the Unit entitled "THE SYNOPSIS." Let us now consider the process actually pursued by the photoplaywright in putting his material into shape.

The first act of the photoplaywright will be to find a suitable story. He will turn to his note-book, or even the daily paper, and there find some such idea as this:

"A young woman and an older woman
in love with the same man."

A little reflection on the complications which are likely to arise from such a situation will suggest that the conflict may be heightened by adding a male character who is in love with the older lady, and whom she greatly respects, although she does not love him. Locating the story, for instance, in Russia, and giving names to our characters, we get the following outline:

Sonia (the young woman) and the Princess Vlatzin (the older woman) are in love with Alexis Galitzin. Count Petroff is in love with the Princess, who greatly respects him and might marry him if it were not for Alexis. In the end Sonia gets Alexis, and the Princess marries Count Petroff.

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Pondering over this outline will probably suggest these questions and answers:

Q. How can the conflict of interests between Sonia and the Princess be made more complete?

A. By making Sonia a relative of the Princess, for instance, a niece.

Q. How can both the Princess and Sonia be made to show their love for Alexis?

A. Suppose Alexis to be in some serious danger. Then each can use her best efforts to save him. He will thus be under obligations to the one who saves his life. If this one is not the woman he loves, still further complications will ensue.

Q. What shall be the peril to which Alexis is exposed?

A. Make him a fugitive from justice, for instance, a conspirator against the Czar's government. Have him take refuge in the Princess's house, at her desire, and remain there in disguise. This will bring him in contact with all the principal characters. It will also give Sonia a chance to fall in love with him without knowing, at first, who he really is, since no one except the Princess is aware of his true identity. This will open the way to several interesting situations. An officer of the govern-

ment may come with a company of soldiers to arrest him.

Q. How shall the Princess conduct herself toward Count Petroff?

A. The Princess respects the Count, and, as she is to marry him in the end, she had better be made to show that at the bottom of her heart she is fond of him. During the play, however, she will probably find him in the way, and she may even go as far as to ask him to sacrifice himself for Alexis.

Q. What shall be the relations between Sonia and the Princess?

A. The Princess loves her niece. This opens the way for several fine situations -- one when the Princess discovers that Alexis is in love with Sonia, but thinks himself bound to the Princess because she has saved his life.

Q. How can the Princess be made to hope for success against the younger charms of Sonia?

A. Make Count Petroff a young man, say, about 35. If Petroff can love her, why not Alexis, who is but a few years younger? The Princess may even decide to experiment on Petroff, thus arousing false hopes in his breast. This gives a chance for a capital comic situation, in which the Princess, delighted that she can be loved by Petroff, a young man, encourages him to declare himself.

Q. Shall Sonia know who Alexis really is?

A. It will be better to have Sonia think at first that he is actually a servant. Several amusing incidents can be made out of this misapprehension.

(TAKING NOTES --- IMPORTANT.)

This process of question and answer should be carried on until all possible complications have been exhausted. Naturally, many ideas will suggest themselves which will afterwards be found to be impracticable; strong situations will be imagined which, as the story develops, will be found out of harmony with the rest of the plot. All these superfluous suggestions will, at the proper time, be thrown aside as useless; but, at the beginning, the photoplaywright should jot down everything, helter-skelter, just as it comes into his head. What particular images are destined to be used, and what thrown away, the playwright cannot at this moment determine. Moreover, a good situation is always valuable property, and may be used in some other play. It not infrequently happens that a playwright, while discarding ideas connected with the play which he is writing, and which perhaps is already half completed, will chance upon some new idea for which he will abandon all that he has previously accomplished.

THE HARVARD COURSE IN PHOTOPLAY WRITING

It is now necessary to elaborate our plot, in some such way as this:

1. The Princess Vlatzin. Dashing, self-possessed, a perfect society woman. Aged about 38. Generous enough to forgive Sonia for loving Alexis, but not the sort of woman to give up without a struggle. Deeply infatuated with Alexis Galitzin, but retaining a high respect for Count Petroff.
2. Sonia de Varna. Aged about 18. An orphan, niece of the Princess Vlatzin, and living with her. Innocent, impulsive, pretty. The kind to fall in love at first sight.
3. Count Petroff. Aged 35. Tries to be brave to impress the Princess, whom he loves, but has a natural shrinking from danger. Imagines all sorts of different dangerous situations in which he wins the favor of the Princess by his courage and daring, but when the actual test comes he wavers. At the last critical moment, however, his manhood asserts itself, and he becomes a hero.
4. Alexis Galitzin. Aged about 25. Brave, reckless, impulsive. Has been condemned for conspiracy against the Czar's government. In disguise as the Princess's groom, under the assumed name of Ivan.
5. General Kunacheff. Aged about 50. Chief of the Czar's secret police. Sly, unscrupulous, suspicious and relentless. Wishes to marry the Princess for her

fortune. Very polite to the ladies, and a polished man-of-the-world.

Our SYNOPSIS OF SITUATIONS AND INCIDENTS

will now look somewhat as follows:

1. Sonia, believing Alexis to be an ordinary servant, is indignant at what she considers his presumption, and tries to make him keep his place.
2. Whilst riding out, Sonia's horse runs away with her. Her life is saved by Alexis, who is in attendance as groom. She is angry at his familiarity, and he confesses that he is not a groom. Sonia proceeds to fall in love with him.
3. Sonia recounts her adventure to the Princess, and the latter suspects that she is beginning to fall in love with Alexis. Situation for the Princess, in which she displays conflicting emotions.
4. The Princess is in doubt whether she is young enough to capture Alexis. Count Petroff shows some signs of being in love with her. She leads him on to propose to her. She shows great delight at her success, which Petroff interprets as a favorable answer.
5. General Kunacheff has heard that Alexis is hiding in the Princess's house, and has come to arrest him. General Kunacheff, who has been refused by the Prin-

cess, is eager to be revenged on her. Alexis, in his disguise as a servant, waits on the General. The latter, not knowing him, offers him a bribe to disclose where the fugitive Alexis Galitzin is hidden. Alexis pretends to accept.

6. The Princess defies the General to find the hunted man.
7. The General has an interview with Sonia, who, terrified out of her senses, unwittingly discloses that Alexis is disguised as one of the servants. She implores mercy of the General, who laughs at her.
Scene — Sonia's self-reproach.
8. Secret joy of the Princess that it is Sonia who has brought Alexis into danger. She believes that if she now saves Alexis, he will be bound to love her.
9. The Princess proposes to Petroff to dress himself in Alexis' clothes and allow himself to be arrested. Petroff struggles with himself, but finally consents.
10. Kunacheff arrests Petroff as Alexis Galitzin.
11. Alexis' gratitude to the Princess. He has not been told that another is to be sacrificed for him. The Princess, mistaking his gratitude for love, confesses her love for him.
12. The General, believing Alexis to be a groom, sends him on an errand on his own horse, thus unwittingly giving him a chance to escape.

13. Comic situation, in which the General describes to Petroff the way in which he will be shot. Petroff is about to confess, but is restrained by the entrance of the Princess.
 14. Scene between Sonia and the Princess. Sonia is in despair. Alexis, before leaving, told her he is bound to another. Joy of the Princess. "But," Sonia adds, "it is only by gratitude, not by love." Despair of the Princess, who, after a struggle with herself, resolves to give him up.
 15. Alexis returns. He has learned that Petroff is to be shot in his place, and will not allow him to be sacrificed.
 16. The Princess gives Sonia to Alexis.
 17. Arrival of a messenger with a pardon for Alexis.
- (In practical work it will be found advisable to write down the incidents on separate slips, which may be arranged in any desired order and supplemented and changed at will.)

REARRANGEMENT.

The play is now well under way. In its general outlines it has arrived at a definite form in the mind of the playwright. The chaotic mass of suggestions has been purged of most of its irrelevant matter, and the remainder has taken

the form of a completely developed organism, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. We have as yet, however, a skeleton, with here and there an occasional nerve or blood-vessel. Enough has been constructed, perhaps, to show the possibilities of the play; it may already be seen what situations there will be, and whether it has situations that will make it live, characters that will satisfy the demands of the performers; but much still remains to be done. Here, as everywhere, it is best to observe some systematic order, and the following is perhaps the most natural:

1. The foundation of the play.
2. Order of incidents.
3. Outline of scenes.

It is very important that the matter which is to be set forth in the FOUNDATION be carefully determined upon before the actual writing of the play is begun. The new writer usually sets about his work by writing the first few scenes of his play. This done, he finds that certain unanticipated explanations are necessary before he can go any farther. The writer finds no point at which he can insert his explanatory matter without badly interrupting the flow of the story. As a consequence, he either drags his explanations in, head and heels, where they do not belong, or, if he is wiser, throws aside the whole composition and begins again on a more systematic plan.

Under the subject of FOUNDATION we may consider:

1. What is to be told.
2. How it shall be told.
3. Preparing for later incidents.
4. Length of foundation matter.

1. What is to be told.

The safe rule is to tell as little as possible. In the first place, the story should be so selected and arranged that the audience will comprehend the story as the action proceeds; and in the second place, all insignificant details should be left to the imagination of the audience, or simply ignored. In the case of the play which we are here building, for instance, the playwright might give full details of the past life of the Princess. He might inform the audience that her father was a Grand Duke who had the most extraordinary adventures during a street riot, and so on, indefinitely. Nothing, however, would more effectively tell the editor considering the script that here was the handiwork of an amateur. These details would wholly irrelevant to the story, and would add nothing to the effect that the Princess produces on the audience. On the other hand, details that add materially to the effectiveness of the appearance of a character, and to the strength of the situations of which he or she is the centre, should not be

left out of account. Thus, it may be worth while to let the audience know that Sonia is an orphan, dependent on the Princess for protection, for this will both win sympathy for the girl and render the position of the Princess more perplexing when the struggle comes between love and duty. Perhaps the following are the most important points to be brought out in the foundation of the play:

1. Sonia's relations to the Princess.
2. The fact that Alexis, the groom, is a nobleman in disguise.
3. The reason for the disguise.
4. The fact that General Kunacheff is coming (with a warrant for Alexis' execution) to search the house.
5. The Princess's love for Alexis.
6. Count Petroff's love for the Princess.
7. Some of the peculiarities of the characters.

(Sonia's love for Alexis will probably begin during the progress of the play, and, therefore, has no place in the foundation.)

2. How it shall be told.

- 1.) Sonia's relations to the Princess will be easily apparent from a conversation between them on almost any topic. Much can be implied in the acting, by looks, etc.
- 2.) If No. 1 of the Synopsis of Scenes, given on a preceding page, is used, Alexis' conduct and manners before Sonia will indicate to the audience that he is not what his livery would indicate him to be. He can be shown wiser than his apparent station, he can be made to pass

judgment on art, discuss politics, etc., in a way that will convince the audience that he is masquerading.

- 3.) The reason for Alexis' disguise, the nature of his crime against the government, the circumstances of his coming to the Princess's villa, will obviously be too complicated to be told in any form except narrative. In an early scene, therefore, the Princess may receive a letter from Alexis' mother, begging that she will protect him from the consequences of his indiscretion. Later on, a scene may occur in which Alexis, at the request of the Princess, relates the circumstances of his escapade.
- 4.) The coming of the General may be announced to Alexis by the Princess, as a reason why he should preserve greater discretion; and the fact that he has been condemned to death may be read by someone in a newspaper paragraph.
- 5.) The actress who takes the part of the Princess may be depended upon, if she knows her business, to show her feeling toward Alexis, even without saying a word. It will be well, of course, to provide scenes in which this opportunity will be given her, as this is an important factor in the play.
- 6.) The above remarks will apply here also; that is, Count Petroff may be allowed to indicate his passion for the Princess by his actions; but a more definite statement of the situation is preferable.
- 7.) The way in which the names and characteristics of the personages are told should be varied as much as possible. Alexis can be addressed by Sonia, before she learns his real social status, as Ivan, and as Alexis by the Princess. His full name may be read in the newspaper paragraph announcing his condemnation. The General's name in full can be mentioned by the Princess when warning Alexis of his approach. Count Petroff, upon his first appearance, may be announced by a servant. The announcement of the name, in all except the case of Count Petroff, may be accompanied by some word or phrase descriptive of character; as, for example, the Princess may say, "Sonia, foolish girl, what are you doing?" or, "Alexis, impulsive as ever, I see," or, "Look out for General Kunacheff; he is a cunning old fox," etc.

3. Preparing for later incidents.

It is an excellent plan to introduce into the very beginning of the play the matter which will serve as preparation for incidents occurring much later. It is true of all plays --and especially true of comedy-- that the spectator experiences a particular delight when, at the close, he finds an incident directly resulting from a fact made prominent at the beginning. In the play which we are here building, the last incident is to be the arrival of the amnesty that secures Alexis' freedom. It will be advisable, therefore, perhaps in the first scene, to introduce some reference to an expected pardon. It may perhaps be referred to in the letter, which the Princess receives from Alexis' mother, as something hoped for.

4. Length of the foundation matter.

As has been said, the foundation should be laid and complete as early as possible, and at least by the time one-fifth of the play has been performed.

ORDER OF INCIDENTS.

The general order of incidents will be apparent, of course, from the general trend of the story, but many will be found which seemingly might occur in one place as well as another. To determine whether the proper order of incidents

has been observed in the first rough outline, it will be well to settle, first of all, what is to be the grand climax. The end, so far as the present story is concerned, will, of course, be the union of Sonia and Alexis, and the pardon of the latter. Consequently, the grand climax must come at the point where this conclusion seems most hopeless, the point at which most obstacles have collected. A careful consideration of our Synopsis of Situations will show that No. 11 best answers this requirement. At that point, Alexis seems pledged to accept the love of the Princess, while Sonia seems to have forfeited all claim to his regard.

The proper arrangement of Incidents requires:

1. That all action up to the point where the Princess tells Alexis of her love should be in the nature of complication; all the action from that point to the end, of the nature of solution.
2. That the incidents be arranged to form a climax, each situation being stronger than the preceding.
3. That the incidents after the climax, while they serve to untie the knot of complications, be so arranged that not all the suspense shall be destroyed until the very end.

The student should carefully examine the Synopsis of Situations — observe whether the order here given satisfies the above requirements, and try various arrangements until the best order is settled upon.

CONNECTION OF SCENES.

No scene should be included in a play which does not find its explanation in some preceding scene, and form the basis of some scene that follows. To accomplish this result, the mind of the playwright must be continually running backward and forward over the skeleton of the play --- backward, to see that each new scene outlined is the logical outcome of what has already been outlined; and forward, to see what effect it may have on the remaining portion of the plot. In many cases he will be able to "justify" a scene whose relevancy is not sufficiently apparent, by going back over his work and inserting a line here and there; in other cases, the introduction of new scenes which seem too valuable to be thrown away will sometimes compel a considerable change in all that comes after them.

SEQUENCE OF SCENES.

As the scenes are the logical connecting links between the important situations and climaxes, they must not be thrown in haphazard, but made to follow a regular, orderly sequence. Each scene should glide into the following one without haste or jar. It should be the direct continuation of the preceding scene and a direct preparation for the one which is to follow. In short, each scene should be made to play its part in the regular rise and fall of the story.

VARIETY OF SCENES.

While each scene is intimately connected with those which precede and follow it, it must not be permitted to be the same in kind, or the play will soon grow monotonous. Every device known to the playwright must, therefore, be employed to secure the effects of variety and contrast. The following points need especial care:

1. Variety of emotions aroused.
2. Variety in number and grouping of characters.

1. Variety of emotions.

This means that there should be a constant change from comic to pathetic, from grave to gay, from frivolous to sentimental. These changes must not be made abruptly (unless by that means some powerful effect may be obtained), but should shade one into the other in the most natural and unobtrusive manner, the change being made just at the point where interest is about to pass into a feeling of monotony.

2. Number and grouping of characters.

The number of characters should be varied from scene to scene. Scenes in which the same number of characters are concerned should be kept apart, and not permitted to follow each other in too close succession. As regards the grouping

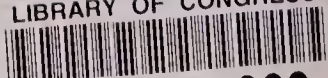
of characters, those characters should be brought together which will best serve to bring out the characteristics one of the other. The frank, impulsive character of Sonia should be used to bring out the polish, the finesse, of the Princess. The vacillation of Count Petroff should be opposed to the reckless daring of Alexis. On the other hand, scenes in which Sonia and Count Petroff are alone together will be of necessity weak, and should be avoided altogether.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTING.

Volumes might be written on this point, and indeed it is not too much to say that right here, if anywhere, lies the secret of successful photoplay writing. Like most secrets, however, it cannot be communicated; it must be discovered by the author himself, either by native genius, or by dint of observation and experiment. There is one invariable rule, however: -- Do not make your characters say in words, via spoken parts or subtitles, what they can express in action. When the Princess, for instance, learns of Alexis' love for Sonia, she should not be made to dissipate her emotion in words -- a look will be vastly more impressive, and it will really tell your audience more than any subtitle or spoken part possibly could.

The method sketched in these pages is not, of course, the only one by which successful photoplays may be written. Almost every playwright has his own way of working, peculiar to his genius and temperament. The process here set forth is intended to be merely suggestive, to lead the student to go at his work in a systematic way, whatever system of his own he may finally develop.

In conclusion, we wish to utter this warning: Do not let your first obstacles defeat, nor your friends and acquaintances discourage you; they are frequently your worst judges. And do not let your own judgment influence you unduly: there have been many cases of writers tearing up plays that they had written, and writing the same play again, perhaps months later, when, to their surprise, the play they had thought worthless was bought at a high figure by the first editor to whom it was submitted. Jot down every idea, every germ or suggestion that comes to you. The imagination is never so lively as when it is on the track of an idea. All sorts of characters, situations, scenes, throng the mind. You will find the copious taking of notes one of the most valuable helps in your new profession. A study of the units of this Course will enable you to turn those ideas into correctly constructed photoplays, and so aid you in helping to accomplish what is, after all, the only hope of the Silent Drama today -- the raising of the general average of dramatic workmanship.

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